

PANGEA Policy 1-2016

Developing a Rewarding, Innovative and Impact Focused Research Culture in the Palaeosciences

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1. Background

The School of BEES recently established a new research centre dedicated to the palaeosciences. The Palaeontology, Geobiology and Earth Archives Research Centre (PANGEA) is one of only a small number of palaeoscience centres in Australia. Its establishment marks UNSW's commitment to developing further an existing strength of BEES, but in a coordinated and strategically focused way.

The Centre has identified seven key aims to be achieved over the next five years. These are:

1. Build an integrated, collaborative, world-class research centre and nation leading research culture in the palaeosciences and related earth and environmental science areas at UNSW.
2. Strengthen the Centre's five research programs by growing postgraduate enrollments, research publication outputs and grant income.
3. Identify emerging research areas cutting across programs for strategic development and develop them through new strategic appointments and new opportunities for collaboration for existing centre researchers.
4. Improve analytical capacities through the establishment of shared equipment and facilities that complement existing UNSW infrastructure and strengthen research priority areas, within the context of the D26 building redevelopment.
5. Establish a nation-leading program and culture of early career researcher and postgraduate training and support in the palaeosciences and related earth and environmental sciences.
6. Implement programs that develop a culture of excellence in research, training and community engagement.
7. Develop succession plans for the retirement of senior members and other movements by staff in the centre and for the centre management team.

To achieve them, the Centre needs to establish a plan and programs for the development of an overarching research culture that emphasises research as a rewarding activity for all centre members, encourages research and scholarly innovation, is focused on improving our research impact and leadership nationally and internationally and helps build a commitment to research excellence.

2. Elements of a research culture

Over the last decade, Australia has followed developments in other university systems like the US and UK in shifting the focus of universities to a research driven culture. An upshot of this has been the publication of a large body of literature describing university research cultures and their key attributes as well as canvassing a range of options to strengthen research activities.

The concept of a 'research culture' is widely regarded as being founded on the idea of *a system of shared values or principles* emphasising the conducting and communicating of scholarly research.

Andrew Cheetham of UWS has defined research culture as "...the structure that gives [research behavior] significance and that allows us to understand and evaluate the research activity."ⁱ

Building on this, *Hanover Research* notes that, "A culture of research provides a supportive context in which research is uniformly expected, discussed, produced, and valued."ⁱⁱ

Across a range of studies, several universal attributes surrounding academic research culture can be identified that are relevant to PANGEA:

- Inclusive decision making for research groups combined with an expectation of participation by all members.
- Collegiality and encouraging/facilitating opportunities for collaboration.
- Adequate infrastructure, facilities and funding to undertake research.
- Mentoring, coaching and professional development opportunities.
- Communication within the group/centre.
- Recognition of the achievements of staff in research production.

These attributes provide a framework around which PANGEA can identify a specific set of practical measures or programs with which to support the development of a research culture that values research as rewarding, and emphasises innovation, impact and leadership.

3. Developing a research culture

PANGEA comprises a wide range of researchers, at varying career stages, including many senior and influential academics. To some extent, therefore, there is no need to 'reinvent the wheel' as the Centre already possesses a deep reservoir of experience and talent.

An important challenge with the establishment of PANGEA is, however, to bring together within a single centre a set of researchers/small groups of researchers who have historically been more or less working in isolation from each other.

The main two keys to successfully achieving this integration are:

1. The development of a set of aims for the Centre that are mutually beneficial.
2. Building a culture of inclusiveness and cross-field collegiality and collaboration.

The framework for the first of these keys has been established by the existing aim, objectives and plans of PANGEA, as set out in the proposal to establish a UNSW research centre paperwork. However, these should not be viewed as static, but rather a 'living' framework that can and should be revisited as the Centre develops organically around its researchers and within the context of a dynamic UNSW policy and strategic environment.

4. Practical steps

PANGEA will implement the following strategies over the next five years to develop and enhance the research culture and activities of the Centre.

(I) Inclusive decision making combined with an expectation of participation by all members.

Ways this might be achieved:

- Openly valuing diversity within PANGEA: cultural, gender, disciplinary and different career stages.
- Regular (monthly) meetings/forums of PANGEA members.
- Encouraging participation by all PANGEA members in policy development and decision making.
- Committees for *research* and *postgraduate students* with participants spanning all/most research groups, varying career stages and with PG student representation.
- Informal meetings: following seminars, morning/afternoon teas, lunches, social drinks.

(II) Collegiality and facilitating opportunities for collaboration.

Ways this might be achieved:

- Mentoring of junior staff by senior academics.
- Seminars given by PANGEA members.
- Reading groups for PG students and junior staff.
- National/international exchanges and joint research projects/programs.
- Informal meetings: following seminars, morning/afternoon teas, lunches, social drinks.
- Support for conference attendance/hosting.
- Other social activities like lunchtime exercise or discussion groups.
- Laboratory tours.
- Establishing a central PANGEA hub in the new BioSciences building.
- Having PG students based in a common PANGEA area in the new BioSciences building.

(III) Adequate infrastructure, facilities and funding to undertake research.

Ways this might be achieved:

- Small seed grants.
- Proactively engaging with the design of the new BioSciences building.
- Seeking out partners for infrastructure grants, internally and externally, for the establishment of new facilities.
- Mentoring junior staff in grant writing.
- Laboratory tours.
- Maintaining an inventory of PANGEA facilities and equipment and providing opportunities for training and usage of them.

(IV) Mentoring, coaching and professional development opportunities.

Some ways this might be achieved:

- Establishing a mentoring program within PANGEA for junior and mid-career academics.
- Utilise the UNSW/BEES mentoring program.
- Encourage PANGEA members to undertake UNSW research training.
- Provide internal PANGEA workshops.

(V) Communication within the centre.

Ways this might be achieved:

- Informal meetings: following seminars, morning/afternoon teas, lunches, social drinks.
- E-mail updates/newsletter.
- PANGEA website.
- Social media.

(VI) Recognition of the achievements of staff in research activities.

Ways this might be achieved:

- Small seed grants.
- Support for conferences.
- E-mail updates/newsletter.
- PANGEA website.
- Social media.
- Broader communication/media coverage.
- Annual awards for staff and PG students.

ⁱ Cheetham, Andrew. "Growing a Research Culture." Address to the Academic Senate – University of Western Sydney, May, 2007. p. 5.

ⁱⁱ Hanover Research, 2004, *Building a culture of research: recommended practices*.